

“Sting of Battle”

By Michael H. Mulraney

Combat may seem like another day at the office until you're there in the thick of it with the bad guys trying to kill you. Here the author recounts a harrowing experience where teamwork and his fellow Marines saved his life.

In the early morning on 27 April 1967, 3d Platoon, Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines moved from Combined Action Company Unit 6, Phu Bai, Republic of Vietnam on a sweep south of our position. After going through rice paddies for about 3 hours we finally got on Highway 1. The platoon was spread out on both sides of the road still moving south. As we got on the road I noticed four or five leeches on my boots. I took my K-Bar and when I cut the leeches in half, both parts went in different directions. This wasn't the first time I had an encounter with these green monsters, and it wouldn't be the last.

We were heading for the Phu Loc area. As we got over the pass, the platoon moved across Highway 1 toward the Laotian border. About 2 hours later, the platoon command post (CP) set up on top of a mountain. The CP was in a position to oversee a valley west of us. Before setting in position at the base, I spread my poncho and put insect repellent around the outside. The area was crawling with leeches, and they were heading for me.

At approximately 1600 hours I heard 105mm howitzer shells coming over us. From the sound of the rounds going off, I was sure we were using air burst fuses on the artillery. We knew then that we were in for some action. We couldn't see what was going on since we were at the base of the mountain and there was a tree line in front of us.

Shortly after the 105s stopped, my squad was called to the platoon CP. We were told by our platoon commander, 1stLt James Dugger, that 3d Squad was to make a sweep in the killing zone. The CP could see bodies of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers and some movement in the area we were heading for. Our mission was to collect weapons and paper only. We dropped our packs and saddled up with additional ammunition, light antitank assault weapons (LAAWs), and fixed bayonets. 1stLt Dugger told Cpl Hayes that he was to take the radio. Cpl Hayes was always cool as a cucumber in a firefight.

The squad moved out in single file keeping our distance. I was approximately 50 meters behind the point man, a recent replacement. We had gone about 500 meters staying close to the base of the mountain. As we came around the base we came into an open area, and there was a tree line to our right about 75 meters with a small opening to our front. I noticed that the point man was looking down but

was off of the trail looking for tripwires. I thought this area would make a good ambush site.

All of a sudden I heard a safety go off. At that moment I gave the hand signal to hit the deck. In front of us I could see that the point man had moved closer to the base of the mountain. The point man had not heard the safety go off. For some reason the NVA only saw me, and they prematurely triggered the L ambush.

As I looked to the right of the point man I saw an NVA soldier standing well over six feet tall and wearing a camouflage uniform. The NVA soldier dropped to the ground with a machinegun with a tripod mounted on it. Right behind him was his partner with a box of ammunition. The firefight was on, and the squad was pinned down by a sudden hail of bullets. I emptied two magazines from my M16, and then called up the M60 gun crew. As the gun crew arrived on my right, both Marines got hit. I then called up the grenadier. The grenadier was doing an outstanding job putting the 40mm rounds right into the tree line.

By this time the point man yelled at me to let me know his M16 had jammed, and he wanted to know what he was to do now that he was out of action. This was his first firefight. I told him to stay close to the base of the mountain and move to my left. All the point man could do was watch and keep his head down.

We had received our M16s just 3 weeks earlier, and after we fired 20 rounds while at Phu Bai, we were told we were ready. What a joke! The M14 was still a better weapon overall at this period of time. I had no confidence in the M16.

About this time I could hear incoming mortars coming from the other side of the tree line. The NVA's accuracy was off target, but one round landed behind Cpl Hayes and myself. Cpl Hayes took some shrapnel in his hands and face and momentarily lost his hearing. Our squad lost contact with the platoon CP for approximately 5 to 10 minutes until Cpl Hayes' hearing came back. The squad wasn't aware of the situation because of the heavy fighting we encountered. We were pinned down and couldn't move forward. Later we were told that we were fighting a platoon of NVA.

Right after the mortars were coming at us, I took an AK-47 round in the chest area. I had difficulty breathing, and I thought to myself—don't go into shock—just maintain and keep your mind clear. It's odd all of the things that go through your mind under such circumstances. As I was lying on my back I noticed rounds hitting around me, but for some reason I never got hit but that one time.

I wasn't a deeply religious person at the time, but did believe in a higher power. I started praying, being thankful for having my limbs and head intact. My big concern was being captured. Then I thought that most likely the NVA would kill me. During

the time I was praying I got a strange feeling that I was being protected by some kind of force. For some reason I knew I would survive.

After I was hit, Cpl Mike Norcross, one of my fire team leaders, took his fire team on line and assaulted the tree line on the far right flank and took out the mortar position with a LAAW. The rest of the squad laid a base of fire in the tree line while Cpl Norcross came into the killing zone to pull me out. As Norcross approached me he yelled out, "Mulraney, we don't have time to make a stretcher; you need to hold on to me."

Prior to Cpl Norcross coming to get me I heard what I thought to be three or four 81mm mortars going over the top of us. The mortars were hitting about 100 meters behind our positions. Years later I found out that Cpl Hayes had called in a gunship with rockets. Cpl Hayes told the pilot to fire a tracer round into the tree line. The gunship was on target, but for some reason the pilot did a 180-degree turn and when Cpl Hayes told him to fire for effect, the gunship fired a salvo of rockets at our position. Lucky for us that the rockets were high, or we would have bought the farm via friendly fire. After the rockets were fired at the squad, Cpl Hayes told the pilot in plain language, "To get the _ _ _ _ out of here! I'm calling in 105s. If you want to stay around that's up to you." Well, it seems the 3d Marine Division headquarters was monitoring the frequency. The next day Cpl Hayes got called on the carpet for being disrespectful to an officer. However, 1stLt Dugger backed up Cpl Hayes because the pilot was off base in firing the rockets at our position. All I have to say is that under combat conditions, many things are said under stress and hopefully are put off to the side.

Mike Norcross carried me out, and the smoke from the rockets camouflaged us while we were getting out of the area. Those rockets indirectly did save us now that I think about our situation. Cpl Hayes was the last Marine to leave the ambush site. He accounted for everyone, and then Cpl Hayes heard the NVA yelling out Norcross' and my names to get the remaining Marines back into the killing zone. Cpl Hayes reassured the remaining squad members that we were out and moving to the landing zone (LZ) area. The platoon CP had moved off of the mountain to a clearing setting up an LZ for the medevac helicopter.

By then it was dark and we had been in the firefight for about 3 hours. While waiting for the medevac helicopter, I requested the corpsman to check for leeches, and of course, he found some around the wound. When the helicopter couldn't get into the LZ because of incoming rounds, the corpsman told the radio operator that I was dying and to get the bird in fast. When I heard what was said I got mad and told the corpsman I wasn't dying. The corpsman was a new replacement, and this was his first firefight.

It was approximately 1930 when the helo was able to get into the LZ. I salute all of the pilots and corpsmen for making it possible for me to survive. If it hadn't been for the Marine Corps training, many of us Marines would not have come back from the war. The question is, would I do it again? You bet!

Mr. Mulraney is a former Marine sergeant. He lives in LaVerne, CA and is attempting to see that then-Cpl Mike Norcross is awarded a Silver Star for heroically saving his life.